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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JEDDAH 000094

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [ECON](#) [KWMN](#) [PGOV](#) [SA](#)

SUBJECT: SPARKS FLY AS JEDDAH MUNICIPAL COUNCIL MEETS WITH  
WOMEN FOR THE FIRST TIME

REF: A. 08 JEDDAH 248

[1](#)B. JEDDAH 78

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Classified By: CG Martin R. Quinn for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. After years of pushing, the women of Jeddah were finally allowed to meet the elected Municipal Council on neutral ground at the offices of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry on March 5. Hesitant council members entered a meeting room featuring a blocking partition which relegated the women to a remote rear section where they were expected to watch the all-male council members on closed-circuit TV. The partition was eventually removed, the women invited to the front of the room and the questions began to fly. After a highly spirited hour of questions, criticism, and requests, the women demanded monthly meetings and specifically asked to join the regular meetings already scheduled for male citizens. The former was granted, the latter is under consideration. The women left triumphant. The council, which will be up for re-election in seven months, left with a long to-do list. End Summary.

Word spreads by text message  
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[1](#)2. (C) Word started traveling through Jeddah by text message and email last week that the Municipal Council had at long last agreed to meet with the women of Jeddah to listen to their "enquiries and demands regarding municipal services." PolEconOff received the message from Fatin Bundagji (Reftel A) and was invited to attend as a Jeddah resident. The meeting, arranged for the inconvenient time of Thursday morning (the equivalent of Saturday morning in the U.S.), was not held at the Municipal Council, in part because because one of the chief instigators, the young Ahmed Sabri, son of Mustapha Sabri the Secretary General of the JCCI, was in a position to offer the facilities of the Chamber's modern offices, but also because the Council seemed unprepared to accept the presence of women at its own offices.

[1](#)3. (C) No one was sure who would show up but the president of the Municipal Council, Mr. Tarek Fedaak, a moderate US-educated urban planner and academic who was appointed to the Shura Council last month, came with several other Council members including Consulate contact Mohammed Abu Dawood of Abu Dawood Industries. The Municipal Council is composed of 14 members, seven appointed and seven elected. Because the elections yielded seven religiously conservative members the Minister of Rural Affairs appointed seven moderates to ensure that the progressive voices of Jeddah were not ignored. Among the moderates are Fedaak and Abu Dawood. The ladies were over 50 strong and included JCCI board member Olfat Kabbani, Khadija Bint Khuwailed Center CEO Basmah Omair (Reftel B), Fatin Bundagji, a participant in last year's trip to observe the U.S. presidential elections, and many other

civic and social leaders from around town. There were also several students from Dar El Hekma women's college and female staff from the JCCI.

#### Breaking down barriers - literally

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14. (C) Upon entering the room PolEconOff found a row of solid wood partitions near the front behind which the women had been despatched -- way behind in an anteroom -- so that the Council would not be able to see them. Apparently, some of the Council members were not comfortable seeing the women though most had no issue with an open meeting. While one occasionally sees opaque glass partitions running lengthwise down a room in Jeddah to separate men from the women, this set-up relegated the women to watching the men they were there to meet by closed-circuit TV from 30 feet away. Upon seeing the room, Omair walked out in protest causing a commotion among Mustapha Sabri and the Council members. She stated that this type of partition is not the practice at the Chamber and that the KBKC would not support it. Her view was that if the women accepted it once it would remain in place forever. PolEconOff was initially told she could remain in front of the partition though subsequently told to join the women in the back. Unusually, a U.S. film crew was filming the event for a documentary about youth and their presence and the presence of PolEconOff may have encouraged the moderates to speak more loudly in favor of permitting the women to move forward. Voices were raised and from afar the women saw the partitions removed. Omair remained in the hallway along with other staff from the JCCI until Sabri succeeded in obtaining the right for the women to move to the front. Omair entered and sat in the front row, decked out in a chic grey abaya and scarf and designer sunglasses. The

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women all took their places with private smiles on their faces. It was a moment of triumph with some of the participants already declaring that history was being made.

15. (C) The women asked questions about all manner of municipal services as would be expected at any meeting of a municipal council. Hot issues included the need for community centers, lack of public transportation appropriate for women, dangerous building sites and the lack of municipal control over construction in general, the severe lack of public space and parks, pollution and litter and the lack of facilities for youth. Omair challenged Fedaak directly by noting that with only seven months left in a four-year term it was a little late to start talking to women and youth (another stated objective). She accused the Council of holding the meeting solely to use as propaganda in upcoming elections and asked what if anything they had done for women to date. Fedaak was taken aback but remained calm. It was the first time the two had met and each seemed to be taking the measure of the other. (Comment: Later Omair said she was overwhelmed by his leadership capabilities and doubted he would be able to move the Council to do anything for the women.) At the conclusion of the meeting amidst calls for better communication the Council offered additional meetings to which the women began to call out, "shahri, shahri!" ("monthly, monthly!"). The Council agreed to monthly meetings at the Chamber -- rather than the Council -- and separate from the men's meetings. The women were displeased and argued strenuously for mixed meetings, but when the meeting ended that issue remained open.

Next: Will women get the vote?

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16. (C) Following the meeting in debriefing the participants it was clear that the Council had learned a lot and the women were ready for more. Fedaak admitted that he had anticipated questions about small children and public restrooms but

seemed unprepared for the women to focus on the same issues that would concern male citizens. Upon returning to her office, Omair declared to her staff, "We won!" She said that now that the partitions had been removed they would never be put back. She declared it an historic day. When the Council demurred at including the women in the men's monthly meetings, one of the Council members had explained that it had taken them three and a half years to teach the men what to do at Council meetings and it would be too hard to start over now with the women. Omair responded, "Don't worry, we'll do our homework." Based on their preparation for this initial, barely-publicized, weekend morning meeting, these women are ready to jump into the fray. Whether they will be allowed to vote in this year's elections will undoubtedly be on their agenda going forward. During the meeting Mohammed Abu Dawood raised the point and argued on their behalf. Afterwards he confided that he would be in the hot seat on the Council for his part in bringing the women forward and removing the partitions as well as for his comments during the meeting supporting their demands. But his forceful personality, the efforts of Sabri pere et fils, and the developing network of professional women at the Chamber augur well for more forward movement this year and next.

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